

φωτος.
Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν,
ἑρχομένον εἰς τὸν κόσμον,
ὅσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο,
εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ
ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν,
οὐ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστε
οῖ οὐκ ἔξ αἱμάτων οὐδ
θελήματός ἀλλ'
14 Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγ
ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν
οἰ πατρός, πλήρης χάρι
τυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κ
ον· ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμε

A Postcolonial Reading OF THE Acts OF THE Apostles

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1

Postcolonial Criticism as an Optic for Biblical Studies

Introduction

Reading biblical texts through the lens of postcolonial criticism offers a new perspective on familiar ancient texts. In this chapter, I describe the development of postcolonial theory in general and its application to biblical studies in particular. I review several postcolonial categories—such as hybridity, diaspora, mimicry, identity, issues of colonialism and race, and representation of the Other—that I will use to read the Acts of the Apostles as a description of one of many groups of Christianity resisting two centers of power: the Roman Empire and the institutions that define Judaism. I conclude the chapter by presenting a critique of postcolonial studies and final observations for the reading that follows.

In chapter 2, I examine Acts 12, the death of Herod Agrippa I, as my starting point: its motif of self-exaltation and self-attribution of divine prerogatives, I would argue, Luke uses as a hidden transcript within the system of imperial worship. The presuppositions of Roman imperial worship I pursue in chapter 3, both in historical context and in Roman religion: the pivotal component of the *neokoros* should be seen, I would argue, as a sole cult for the emperor and not as a combined worship to god/dess and emperor. Once the theoretical and methodological framework has been analyzed, I continue by analyzing the following representations at work in the Acts of the Apostles and their implications: first, the institutions that define Judaism (chapter 4); second, the Roman Empire (chapter 5). I conclude by returning to the theoretical and methodological framework by way of general conclusions and observations.

Postcolonial theory is polysemous in meaning and application. It was initially conceived of as Commonwealth studies—the literary critique of British Imperialism from the people of the former Colonies. Later, it began to include readings from other French and European Colonies, especially from the Caribbean, India, and Africa. During and after the development of the Enlightenment, Romanticism and other philosophical trends, the historical critical method show that every critical method applied to biblical studies is a generalization of studies in contemporary literature.¹ Most of the time, these ap-

¹ R. Fernández Retamar quoting Tzvetan Todorov: “Formalistes et futuristes”, in *Tel Quel*, n° 30, otoño de 1968, p. 43, quoted in Krystina Pomorska (in *Russian formalist theory and its poetic ambience*, Mouton, 1968), webpage. <http://www.literature.us.roberto/caliban6.html>.

proaches were carried out in a subjective vacuum and in complete isolation from the reality of flesh-and-blood readers. Using a scientific study of ancient texts, the excavators and diggers reconstructed, in absolute fashion, an ahistoricisation of the people's lives and possessors of these ancient texts.² In these literary 'creations,' inherent colonialism and imperialism came to the fore with overtones of superiority, missionizing obligations, mercantilism, and territorial expansion. Because of these overtones, studies of these texts demanded a break from the typical silence of the academy and the rhetoric of complicity, a break from the methodical silencing and denying of the voices of these people-groups who were studied, a rupture from the habitual promoting of the colonizer on the one side and the denigrating and obliterating of the local values of the colonized on the other.

Edward W. Said—author of the seminal work, *Orientalism*—is considered one of the foremost exponents of these inequalities of representation.³ Said was able to prove that European literary creations were no more than a representation of the writers, rather than of those written about. Other scholars such as Enrique Dussel remind us that Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, perhaps as a prophetic precursor, “understood and expressed the dialectic of master and slave—two centuries before Rousseau, and three before Hegel or Marx—on a global scale.”⁴

Of course, postcolonialism is not simply a Western phenomenon. R.S. Sugirtharajah in his article “Charting the Aftermath: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism”⁵ mentions Amílcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, and Ananda Coormarswamy as writers from the colonial world whose mostly anti-colonial discourse articulated the ‘suffering of colonialism.’

Said and others scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak based their analysis on that of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist who was the first to foreground and grapple seriously with the concept of the “Southern question” as the central problem in Italian life and introduced the concept of the subal-

² For an excellent characterization of the grand models and competing discourses, see the first three chapters in Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins*, (New York: Orbis Book, 2000). Abbreviated as *Decolonizing* hereafter.

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). The book has many editions.

⁴ Enrique Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxist, and Liberation Theology*. Edited by Eduardo Mandieta. (Lanham/Boulder/New York/Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2003), 214. I will return and expand on this in the discussion below on the categories of race and colonialism.

⁵ Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, (Oxford: Blackwell Pub Ltd, 2006), 11. Previously published in *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Abbreviated as *PBR* hereafter.

tern. Gramsci holds that “subalternity is a condition marked by the absence of a will or project on the part of a social group to achieve an integral organic critical self-consciousness.”⁶ For Gramsci the subaltern are those classes “lacking in or deprived of historical force.” Spivak states that “the subaltern has been redefined to encompass all subordinated populations oppressed by colonial/postcolonial regimes in various way (economic, racial, sexist), to which the supplement of resistance acts a contrapuntal chord.”⁷ Thus, subalterity is associated with epithets such as simple, inorganic, fragmentary, passive, and derivative. These terms were studied under the umbrella of the opposite term of ‘hegemony’ which connotes the qualities of being organic, unitary, original, and active.⁸

Putting it succinctly, earlier anti-colonial responses from the Caribbean, Africa (e.g. by Chinua Achebe), India,⁹ etc.—in addition to the movements of feminism, civil rights, and Liberation theology during the sixties and seventies—paved the way for postcolonialism. Thus, R.S. Sugirtharajah states, “Post-colonial studies emerged as a way of engaging with the textual, historical and cultural articulations of societies disturbed and transformed by the historical reality of colonial presence.”¹⁰

Definitions

There have been several attempts to define postcolonialism. Some emphasize the reading, the optic, a post-colonial state, etc. The difficulty of an absolute definition lies in the fact that this “field of inquiry is not monolithic but rather a field which provides and caters to a variety of concerns, oppositional stances, and even contradictory positions.”¹¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* define it as:

A way of reading and rereading texts of both metropolitan and colonial cultures to draw deliberate attention to the profound and inescapable effects

⁶ Epifanio San Juan, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, (New York: San Martin’s Press, 1998), 95.

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Spivak reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Edited by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 203.

⁸ Alberto Maria Cirese, “Gramsci’s Observation on Folklore.” *Approaches to Gramsci*. Ed. Anne Showstack Sasson. London: Writers and Readers, 1982, quoted by San Juan, 97.

⁹ For a description on literature see: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial literatures*. (London: Routledge, 1989). Annia Loomba. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. (London: Routledge, 1998); John McLeod. *Beginning Post-colonialism*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2000).

¹⁰ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *PBR*, 11.

¹¹ Sugirtharajah, *ibid*, 7.

of colonization on literary production; anthropological accounts; historical records; administrative and scientific writing.¹²

Epifanio San Juan attests: “I consider postcolonial as the cultural logic of this mixture and multilayering of forms taken as the ethos of late modernity, a logic distanced from its grounding in the unsynchronized interaction between the civilizations of the colonial powers and the colonized subalterns.”¹³ Later, he says, more harshly, that “postcolonial theory, in brief, can be read as metaphysical idealism masking its counterrevolutionary telos by denying its own worldly interest and genealogy.”¹⁴

According to Vijay Mishra and Bod Hodge, “postcolonialism, ...foregrounds a politics of opposition and struggle and problematizes the key relationship between centre and periphery.”¹⁵ In the counter-relationship between the center and periphery, cultural critic Homi Bhabha defines “the postcolonial discourse of cultural difference [as] essentially ambivalent, liminal, hybrid, disjunctive, chock-full of ironies and aporias; unrepresentable by definition, it refuses the logic of representation and all principles of intelligibility.”¹⁶ He adds,

Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third world countries, and the discourses of “minorities” within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories, of nations, races, communities, people.¹⁷

In sum, postcolonial theory is an effort to create a critical discourse that contests the ‘settings of modernity’ with other forms of enunciation.¹⁸ In addition, postcolonial theory contains elements of deconstruction criticism as an

Attempt to radical decentering by unearthing and subverting the unquestioned assumptions on which the metaphysical tradition are based... that works by positing binary opposition...and by systematically affirming the superiority of the first over the second term.”¹⁹

¹² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), 192.

¹³ San Juan, 5.

¹⁴ San Juan, 10. Later in this chapter I offer more of my criticism of his theory.

¹⁵ Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, 276 quoted by San Juan, 24.

¹⁶ Bhabha, 1990, quoted by San Juan 25.

¹⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 171, edition Routledge Classic 2004, pg. 245–6. Abbreviated as LC with two editions 1994 and 2004.

¹⁸ Bhabha, LC, 2004, 365.

¹⁹ David Jobling, “Structuralism and Deconstruction” in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, John H. Hayes, editor, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), Vol 2, 510.

This we also see in postcolonial theory's use of concepts such as: identity, the problematic of orthodoxy and orthopraxis of Liberation Theology; deconstruction criticism and the works of the post-structuralist like Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault which highlight the notions of difference and the definition of the Other. However, some theoreticians still criticize these poststructuralist deconstructions as part of another Eurocentric ideological movement that criticizes the establishment of the binarism of interpretation, speaking of "difference" and "alterity" that result—similar to colonialism itself—in the same practices of imposed definitions and "unifying the sameness."²⁰

In sum, postcolonial theory is an attempt to 'interrupt,' to read 'contrapuntally' and 'interrogatively' the tragic experiences of those dispossessed of voice and discriminated against, those "who have suffered the sentence of history," in order, instead, to formulate critical revisions of cultural differences and "empowering strategies of emancipations."²¹

The Prefix "Post"

In postcolonial theory, the prefix "post" indicates a critical process "that goes beyond the colonial in all its forms,"²² but always as a project or strategy of resistance. I use the word "project" deliberately to emphasize the continuity of the process of decolonization as a continual re-evaluation of any and all policies, treaties, and systems of thoughts, economic decisions and sanctions in any and all systems of power toward the other. In other words, the prefix "post" is not simply anti-imperialistic; it does not attack or resist per se the discursive domination only from the powerful, globalized empires but between any groups of people and structures of unequal power.

Segovia suggests that the term postcolonial may be understood simply as a temporal application of what follows the colonial, without assuming the end of colonialism in itself. Others resist the term as meaning being definitely after something; for example, Mark L. Taylor suggests "there is no simple epoch after colonialism."²³ However, postcolonial theory's most important characteristic is the critical questioning of the thought and practices of colonialism.²⁴

²⁰ See Stephen Moore, "Postcolonialism" in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretations*. Ed A. K.M. Adam (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).

²¹ Bhabha, *LC* 2004, 246.

²² Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera, editors, "Introduction: Alien/Nation, Liberation, and the Postcolonial Underground" in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 7; henceforth abbreviated as *PTDE*.

²³ Mark Lewis Taylor, "Spirit and Liberation" in *PTDE*, 44.

²⁴ Fernando F. Segovia, "Interpreting Beyond Borders: Postcolonial Studies and Diasporic Studies in Biblical Criticism", in *IBB*. 2000, 12.